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Warming the Winter Hours

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A bookmark has, for years, kept the page ready for my returning. Lately, I've returned more frequently than usual. In her collection of essays and prose poems, *Winter Hours*, published in 1999, Mary Oliver saves the title essay for last. Although universal in its themes of suffering and resilience, it feels today as if it had been written just for us, just for now, and it never fails to awaken fresh resolve.

The essay is startling in that it casts hope not as Emily Dickinson's "thing with feathers" but rather as a feet-on-the ground warrior, fierce and rebellious:

> In the winter I am writing about, there was much darkness. Darkness of name, darkness of event, darkness of the light of reason. I would speak here of the darkness of the world and the light of _____. But I don't know what to call it. Maybe hope. Maybe faith, but not a shaped faith—only, say, a gesture, or a continuum of gestures. But probably it is closer to hope, that is, more active and far messier than faith must be. Faith, as I imagine it, is tensile, and cool, and has no need of words. Hope, I know, is a fighter and a screamer.

I still recall my surprise, and my "aha" smile, when I read that last sentence. By the time she wrote it, Mary had become a frequent contributor to *Appalachia*. Over the years that I edited the journal, from 2000 to 2006, I knew her to be kind, generous, and humble. We would laugh at her sometimes whimsical use of commas, and I understood that I must remind the printer—every time—that her line breaks were to be unfailingly honored, even if that meant adjusting the typeface or leading. She was gentle in her manner, unyielding in her art, shy with people, daring with words. Knowing those things allowed me to see her unusual characterization of hope as perfectly suited to her worldview. And, as I'd realized so often on reading her poetry and prose, I knew she had gotten it right.

Mary understood, perhaps too well, that in disruptive and disheartening times, the temptation is to withdraw, to leave the fray and retreat into our work, our routines, our selves. When I read this essay for the first time, I was all too ready to do that. But her words jolted me out of that dark place and kept me from sinking passively into some doughy mess of faux comfort:

> Sometimes I think if I were just a little tougher made, I would go altogether to the woods—to my work entirely, and solitude, a few friends, books, my dogs, all things peaceful, ready for meditation and industry—if for no other reason than to escape the heart-jamming damages and discouragements of the world's mean spirits. But, no use. Even the most solitudinous of us is communal by habit, and indeed by commitment to the bravest of our dreams, which is to make a moral world. The whirlwind of human behavior is not to be set aside.

Although Mary claims that retreating into solitude would be the "tougher" thing to do when cruel forces threaten, her choice—to commit, to confront, to participate—demands much more of us. She doesn't deny the pain we endure—the grief, the despair—but she urges us to view "struggle and rising as the real work of our lives."

As I read and reread her words, I continue to find strength in Mary's insight. A warrior-poet, in her way, she found her weapons in love and nature. If we're brave enough to sustain hope ourselves, we're smart enough to understand that it isn't light and airy; it's the armor we put on to face the day's battles, our own and the world's. Although she is gone, Mary's words will forever keep reminding us that our only real choice is to fight on.

Lucille Stott was the editor-in-chief of *Appalachia* from 2000 to 2006 and remains a contributing editor. She is the author of *Saving Thoreau's Birthplace: How Citizens Rallied to Bring Henry Out of the Woods* (TMC Books, 2018).